

Jennifer, the deputy, was pleased with the way the staff got behind the new regime. "Everyone genuinely wants to do the best thing here," she says. It helped that the changes were based on solid foundations and brought in with the school's unique character in mind, she adds. "One of the key things is that when we've changed things and improved or adapted, it's always research-based. But equally, we're not just saying, 'We've seen this in another school and it's worked there.' We're also asking, 'What's the Castle Hill way?'"

Every member of staff attended those early PD days, and the Dix book was read by all. "We're talking caretakers, cleaners, office staff, midday supervisors, everybody," says Gemma. "It was about changing relationships."

Another touchstone has been a TED talk by educationalist Rita Pierson, in which she discusses significant relationships and how learning cannot take place without them. "My staff are bored of watching it now but they have to watch it, because that is who we are. We've talked about how to build those relationships."

So it was 'out with the punitive and in with the positive', exemplified by tools such as recognition boards in each classroom. Gemma explains: "As a teacher you have complete autonomy over it. You set a target for what you're looking for, you go after it, and when you see it, you put the child on the recognition board. But if they do something that goes against it, you don't shame them for it. They're on there and they've earned that place."

4 BACK FROM THE EDGE

Gemma admits the new measures and attempts to change the culture didn't bear fruit as quickly as she'd hoped. "This time two years ago, we were on our knees," she recalls. "I thought I'd made the biggest mistake of my career and my headship was doomed. But we have a little angel who lives down in Cornwall who has championed us from the start, Julie Harmison, who now works for Trauma Informed Schools. I remember ringing her on the way home from school on the final day of half-term, in tears, saying, 'I've got it all wrong.' She said, 'No you haven't, you've got to keep going. You've hit rock bottom and it will get better.' And she was right. So we soldiered on."

Gemma recognised, however, that a piece of the puzzle was missing. "We needed to bring in something else because while some children are able to regulate and some have the emotional literacy, others haven't and they've had life experiences that prevent them from having that language. That's when we looked and found Trauma Informed Schools, and we looked



Meet the staff



**DAWN ALLUM,
PASTORAL LEAD**

I've worked at the school for 20 years. I've been a midday supervisor, a TA and a learning mentor. I've been in my current role for nearly two years. I've seen lots of changes. We're a more inclusive school now and we're trauma informed. We have good communication with the parents and we're very approachable, and that's a big difference.



**LOUISE PATTINSON,
SENCO**

I came here the January after Gemma started. She was my professional coach before I started here. It's been a big task to take on and lots of hard work but very exciting. We now have an inclusion and intervention team that really helps. We all work collaboratively together for the wellbeing of the children. That's embedded in our day-to-day teaching.



**HANNAH SMITH,
NURTURE LEAD**

I've been here for six years. I started as a TA. The biggest challenge of my job is working with children who have had trauma in their lives and pupils who find learning difficult. Gemma is amazing and helps with all of us. She's always there for me when I feel a little but overwhelmed with everything that's going on.



**JENNIFER SMITH, DEPUTY
HEAD AND DSL**

We stripped back the rules that were in place. They differ according to classrooms. And just to go to assembly there might have been ten rules - you walk on the left, or you do this, or stand in this line. In actual fact, these were routines we needed to get right, whereas the rules were simple: ready, respectful, safe.

at the diploma and decided that was the way forward. So four of us went through the diploma and are trauma informed practitioners."

The school's Pivotal ethos has now been mapped with the Trauma Informed approach, and it's been transformational, says Gemma. Castle Hill is also ACE aware.

The combination of all this makes for a unique school environment. In most schools, if there's a problem in the classroom then a member of the senior leadership team is called for. But at Castle Hill, a call goes out (often via walkie talkie) for 'an emotionally available adult'. Gemma explains: "If you're not feeling emotionally available, that allows you to say, 'It's not me right now, because I'm not going to help this situation.' Or we might know we can be a trigger for that child, so we try to mobilise an adult who can be emotionally available for them."

Castle Hill also boasts a fully functioning sensory room and a developmental playground with a sensory swing - "because some children just want to swing!" And there's a nurture room, forest school, calm spaces in the classroom, a trampoline and an outside gym.

So what's next? "What we have observed is missing is supervision for teaching staff," says Gemma. "We're working with the education psychology team at the British Psychology Council to design a school-wide supervision programme that we hope to roll out next year. When we've offered it to all teachers, I think it will really help."

It's a logical next step: if teachers are to be emotionally available for pupils, they too need an outlet. As Gemma observes, "We can't pour from an empty cup." TP